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SUBJECT: GENERAL SANTOS CITY WILL WELCOME USS BLUE RIDGE

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¶1. (U) South Cotabato provincial governor Daisy Avance-Fuentes and General Santos City Mayor Pedro Acharon, Jr., in separate meetings on January 31 with an Embassy delegation composed of Pol/C, JUSMAG chief, and DATT, voiced enthusiastic support for the February 17-18 visit of the USS Blue Ridge to General Santos City and predicted a warm welcome. Governor Fuentes admitted that a few leftist groups may stage some protests, but opined that these would be small scale and not reflective of the views of most inhabitants. Mayor Acharon pledged full security support, while noting interest in moving a projected Blue Ridge band concert from the pier to a downtown location so that more people could enjoy it.

¶2. (U) Pol/C expressed our condolences on the January 10 bombing in General Santos city that killed six and injured 30. Governor Fuentes said that such bombings "set General Santos back 2-3 years" in terms of attracting investment and tourism, but she commented that a high profile visit like the Blue Ridge's could help counteract this image. She underscored that this ship visit, the first by a U.S. Navy vessel in many years, would also dispel the impression that the U.S. Government was only interested in the Sulu Archipelago, the focus of many counterterrorism and developmental programs. Both Governor Fuentes and Mayor Acharon were appreciative of the new U.S. Government reward - up to US\$50,000 - for Abdul Basit Usman, believed to be involved in the January 10 bombing.

¶3. (U) Mayor Acharon joined Pol/C at a separate event to inaugurate a USAID-funded Computer Literacy and Internet Connection (CLIC) program at the Training Department (high school) of the College of Education of the Mindanao State University campus in General Santos City. This school is now among the 489 schools throughout Mindanao, including 17 in General Santos City, to benefit from this program, which has brought the internet and computers to about 440,000 students and 12,000 teachers already. Pol/C underscored the importance of partnership - with the school and its Parent Teacher Cooperative Association and with private and corporate sector donors, as well as between the U.S. people and government and the Philippine people and government - especially as our two nations celebrate the 60th anniversary of our bilateral friendship.

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